

The Cleveland Museum of Art

Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi Appointed Curator of African Art

News Release

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Cleveland, OH (June 2, 2017)—The Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA) has announced the appointment of Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi as Curator of African Art, following an international search. He will assume his responsibilities at the CMA on August 1, in charge of the museum's outstanding collection of works of art from sub-Saharan Africa, comprised of a diverse selection of masks and figurative sculpture from West and Central Africa. More recently the collection has been significantly augmented by a group of Congolese sculptures.

"Smooth is an exceptional curator with a remarkably creative approach. He has distinguished himself in the field of African art by juxtaposing historical objects with modern and contemporary art from the continent, highlighting the dialogue between the past and present. We very much look forward to having him as a colleague in Cleveland, and to experiencing the ways that he will encourage our audiences to engage with historic and contemporary African art," said Director William M. Griswold.

As Curator of African Art, Nzewi will oversee the care and development of the collection, working closely with the Director and Chief Curator on the identification and acquisition of works of art to augment the collection. He will guide and organize special exhibitions exploring all aspects of African art, from the historic through the contemporary.

Cleveland's African art collection includes about 300 works of tradition-based art from Africa south of the Sahara. The core of this collection was donated to the museum in the 1960s and '70s by the late Cleveland collector Katherine C. White. Some of the strongest objects in the collection were created by the Senufo people (Ivory Coast), the Yoruba people (Nigeria), the Benin Kingdom (Nigeria), and the so-called Kwango-Kwilu region (southwest region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo). The past fifteen years represent a time of significant growth, including the addition of a distinguished ensemble of thirty-four Congolese sculptures acquired through a gift-purchase arrangement from the Brussels collectors René and Odette Delenne.

“It is a great honor for me to be joining the Cleveland Museum of Art at such an opportune time,” said Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi. “The CMA is a global institution and highly regarded around the world. Its first-class collection of African art, incredible support for scholarship and groundbreaking exhibitions are obvious reasons to come to the museum. I look forward to building on the excellent work done by the previous curator of African art through cutting-edge scholarship in support of exhibitions, publications, and in engaging our diverse audience, working in concert with my colleagues. Ultimately, the goal is to expand the understanding of the arts of Africa through landmark acquisitions and innovative exhibition strategies that link together historical, modern and contemporary African arts, and placing them in local, transnational, and global contexts. I am really looking forward to forging a strong connection with lovers and supporters of African art in the Cleveland community and surrounding areas.”

As a curator and practicing artist, Nzewi brings a unique combination of experience and academic training in three different countries to the CMA. In 2013, he joined the curatorial team at Dartmouth’s Hood Museum of Art as Curator of African Art where he mounted such diverse exhibitions as *Eric Van Hove: The Craft of Art* (2016); *Ukaru: Ritual Cloth of the Ekpe Secret Society* (2015); and *The Art of Weapons: Selections from the African Collection* (2014). He is currently curating the exhibition *Feedback: Art, Africa, and the Eighties*, which will be on view at the Iwalewa Haus Museum, University of Bayreuth, and will travel to other venues including the Hood Museum of Art starting in 2018. Prior to his employment at the Hood, Nzewi was a fellow at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art and a practicing artist and independent curator based in Nigeria.

Nzewi has also co-curated major international exhibitions including the Dak’Art Biennale in Dakar, Senegal, in 2014, the major platform for contemporary art in Africa. He also served on the curatorial team of the 11th Shanghai Biennale in 2016–17, and is collaborating with the Fonds Régional d’Art Contemporain de la Région Centre (FRANC) Orlean, France, for its inaugural architecture biennale in October 2017.

In addition to his curatorial work, Nzewi has taught at the Institute of African Studies, University of Bayreuth, Dartmouth College, and Emory University. He has lectured widely at academic institutions and museums such as the University of Cape Town, South Africa; Freie University, Berlin; Princeton University; Columbia University; University of Kentucky, Louisville; University of the Arts, Zurich; the DeYoung Museum of Art, San Francisco; and the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.

Nzewi is a prolific writer. He has contributed essays and chapters to a range of publications, including “Anthropology of Practice: Artists of Africa and the Ethnographic Field in Contemporary Art,” in *Alternative Art and Anthropology: Global Encounters*, edited by Arnd Schneider (London: Bloomsbury, 2017) and “A Nigerian Tradition of Independent Art Spaces/Initiatives,” *New Spaces for Negotiating Art and Histories in Africa*, edited by Kerstin Pinther, Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi, and Berit Fischer (Berlin: LitVerlag, 2015). His articles include “The Head in Focus: Benin Art and Visual History,” *Manual*, issue 8 [Give and Take], (Spring 2017): 30–42; “The Individual and Community: Aesthetics of Blackness in the Works of Three Black British Artists,” *Critical Interventions* 12 (Fall 2013): 20–36; and “Embodying the Sacred in Yoruba Art,” *African Arts* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 32–43.

Nzewi holds a PhD in Art History from the Emory University, a PG. Diploma in the African Program in Museum and Heritage Studies from the University of Western Cape, South Africa, and a BA in sculpture from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria. He has been the recipient of several academic fellowships, scholarships, and artist awards, including a Rockefeller Foundation grant, a TIAA-CREF Ruth Simms Hamilton Fellowship, a Smithsonian Institution Fellowship, a Robert Sterling Clark Foundation Fellowship, and Prince Claus Travel Award.

Nzewi will be moving to Cleveland with his family.



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About the Cleveland Museum of Art

The Cleveland Museum of Art is renowned for the quality and breadth of its collection, which includes more than 63,000 artworks and spans 6,000 years of achievement in the arts. The museum is a significant

international forum for exhibitions, scholarship and performing arts and is a leader in digital innovations. One of the top comprehensive art museums in the nation, recognized for its award-winning Open Access program and free of charge to all, the Cleveland Museum of Art is located in the University Circle neighborhood.

The museum is supported in part by residents of Cuyahoga County through a public grant from Cuyahoga Arts & Culture and made possible in part by the Ohio Arts Council (OAC), which receives support from the State of Ohio and the National Endowment for the Arts. The OAC is a state agency that funds and supports quality arts experiences to strengthen Ohio communities culturally, educationally and economically. For more information about the museum and its holdings, programs and events, call 888-CMA-0033 or visit cma.org [1].

Press Announcements [2]

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